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Queering it Right, Getting it Wrong

HECTOR KOLLIAS

Abstract:

This article seeks to interrogate the moment of queer theory's 'birth' out of French influences, or what is designated by the umbrella term 'French Theory'. It specifically points to the operations of transformation and dislocation, subversion and perversion of French theoretical influences at work in two distinctive 'pairings' of French 'progenitor' and American queer 'offspring': Jacques Derrida with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Jacques Lacan with Judith Butler.

Keywords: French theory, queer theory, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler

Introduction: Axiomatic

This essay proposes that many of the major critical discourses on identity and sexuality that came to be organized under the term queer theory in the US in the early 1990s are structured by a movement of appropriation and dislocation of a few key elements taken from theoretical discourses developed in France since the 1960s. Queer theory is one of the many offspring of what came to be called 'French Theory', its siblings including 'Yale school' textual criticism and postcolonial theory. But the metaphor of birth and parentage, though instructive in some respects and strategically useful as historical gloss, is an inadequate description of the processes taking place, not only in the formation of queer theory (or any of its other siblings) from French primary material, but in the transformation of a disparate collection of French ideas, texts and proper names symbolizing them into the concept 'French Theory'. François Cusset, in a book of that title, maps the history of this transformation in an exemplary way,

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taking in the various historical and political contexts that mark the cultural exchange between France and American academia.¹ I do not wish to retell this history; rather I want to focus on a specific argument about the transmission of ideas between different national contexts which I shall take as axiomatic, namely that in this transmission ‘one can speak of a “structural misunderstanding” [a notion Cusset takes from Bourdieu], not in the sense of a misreading, an error, a betrayal of some original, but in the sense of a highly productive transfer of words and concepts from one specific market of symbolic goods to another’ (xiv–xv).

My aim is to take this axiom and examine how it functions in the moment when queer theory first came to be articulated as such, and more precisely to examine the ways in which French influences have been worked through, twisted, repudiated in two specific Franco-American pairings: Derrida and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick; and Lacan and Judith Butler. These pairings are not arbitrary, but I do not wish to suggest they hold some essential key to understanding the process of transformation from French to queer theory. Although Cusset does not himself provide such explicit links, I take these pairings to conform to his diagnosis of a particular moment in the story of ‘French Theory’. As Cusset’s narrative goes:

Following the carefree anarcho-poetic textualism of the seventies, and alongside the literary purism of Derrida’s Yale followers, the conservative revolution of the Reagan years provoked the return of the repressed: the notorious *referent*, evacuated by these formalistic versions of French theory, made a sudden comeback under the name of *identity politics*. This was heart-warming news for all those who had given up hope of penetrating the black box—French theory had a focus after all, and it was none other than unearthing minority identities, and the lot of subjugated groups, whose very existence was being threatened by a reactionary hydra. (131–2)

Cusset’s rather inflated rhetoric does at least have the benefit of succinctly placing the meeting between French theory and American identity politics in a political and historical context. And it seems to me undeniable that it is from exactly that context and that meeting that queer theory was born. The pairings I have chosen to discuss all exemplify the process whereby queer theory was born out of the political need to bring radical French anti-humanist thought to bear upon issues of identity. It would be very difficult to suggest that Foucault, Derrida or Lacan shared a common political orientation, let alone a political agenda, but their thought was forcefully and

successfully used by Sedgwick, Butler and many others in the services of common queer political ends. The vague French appellation 'la pensée soixante-huit' is nowhere near as politically concrete as what is designated by the term *queer*. Despite obvious and unavoidable differences of opinion, despite divergent political affiliations over a twenty-year history, queer theory shares an agenda, one that seeks to subvert and problematize notions of identity, beginning with sexual identity, and one which has been repeated tirelessly through this long history. I shall argue that the parentage of queer theory's political concerns lies with the French names already mentioned. What happens to the ideas and the theories associated with these names when they are passed on to the queer generation and mapped on to its political agenda is the main question I am seeking to address. But, as has also endlessly been shown, I must also concede that the key inspiration, the key parental figure, is Michel Foucault, whose presence is inexorably marked in the writings of Butler and Sedgwick, but who, for that very reason, figures as a more readily avowed parentage whose significance can, indeed, be taken as 'axiomatic'.

Epistemology after Metaphysics

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* is a pivotal moment in the history of queer theory, often credited with kick-starting it all.² The presence of Foucault is here unmistakable and the arguments of the book rest squarely upon an assumption of the theories of the first volume of *A History of Sexuality*:

in accord with Foucault's demonstration, whose results I take to be axiomatic, that modern Western culture has placed what it calls sexuality in a more and more distinctively privileged relation to our most prized constructs of individual identity, truth, and knowledge, it becomes truer and truer that the language of sexuality not only intersects with but transforms the other languages and relations by which we know. (3)

It would be worth worrying about how the 'demonstration' offered by Foucault's arguments can be taken as axiomatic but my focus here will not be directly on Foucault and his indisputable influence. The second, equally glaring French theoretical presence in Sedgwick's book is Jacques Derrida. Or rather, it is deconstruction and its cognates, most usually the adjective 'deconstructive' applied as description of Sedgwick's strategy, which form the crux of a series of negotiations starting with the famous opening sentence: '*Epistemology of the Closet*

proposes that many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured — indeed, fractured — by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition.’ (1) The very form of that sentence already prefigures the ways deconstruction will be used and dislocated in the rest of the book. On the one hand, the reliance on the binary opposition and the sleight of hand with which ‘structured’ becomes ‘fractured’ are both familiar instances of Derridean rhetoric; on the other, the focus on ‘twentieth-century Western culture’, and the narrativizing emphasis of ‘chronic, now endemic’ point to an operation which should be called historicizing, placing a stress on particular historical horizons. It is the conjunction of this historicizing tendency, demonstrably originating in Foucault, alongside the given field of ‘nodes of thought and knowledge’, with the deconstructive strategy that will concern me here.

From the very first sentence, then, it becomes clear that Sedgwick’s use of ‘deconstruction’ and ‘deconstructive’ is *restricted* to the analysis of what she calls ‘binarisms’, and to showing the effect that these have on modes of knowledge. This is indeed a restriction but I am not trying to indict Sedgwick with the crime of falsifying deconstruction, simply because that is not in the least interesting. What is interesting is what this restriction, or even reduction, this particularization of deconstruction as strategy yields. And my point here will be that the stress on ‘binarisms’ is exactly the kind of narrowing of focus that will allow deconstruction arguably to become, after Foucauldian discourse analysis, the second major tool in the toolbox of queer theory. When Sedgwick first makes an appeal to the term ‘deconstructive’ to characterize ‘one main strand of the argument in this book’ (9), she identifies the deconstruction of binaries, giving a succinct general demonstration of the strategy, as something that is already a given critical *topos*, an understanding of deconstruction as a strategy that we can all share, as it has already been in use for many years in the academic context. Here is the brief definition of the strategy:

The analytic move it [the deconstructive argument] makes is to demonstrate that categories *presented in a culture* as symmetrical binary oppositions — heterosexual/homosexual in this case — actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation according to which, first, term B is not symmetrical with but subordinated to term A; but second, the valorized term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of term B; hence,

third, the question of priority between the supposed central and the supposed marginal category of each dyad is irresolvably unstable, an instability caused by the fact that term B is constituted as at once internal and external to term A. (9–10, emphasis mine)

There is no faulting the logic of presentation, or the accuracy of argument here. But there is also, clearly discernible in the phrase ‘categories presented *in a culture*’, the mark of the particularization I referred to earlier. Derrida’s first forays into the kind of strategic analysis Sedgwick presents here are to do with the logic of the sign in Husserl’s phenomenology and with the major elision of writing under speech in the history of Western philosophy.³ Particularly in *Of Grammatology* the context in which such a deconstructive strategy operates is that of the deconstruction of what Derrida calls logocentrism or ‘the metaphysics of presence’ and, crucially, that context is not that of *a culture* but rather of the entire history of Western philosophy. The logical and epistemic reach of Derrida’s project, as was surely not lost on either ‘friendly’ appropriators like Sedgwick or its many detractors, is a markedly and significantly *universal* one, if by universal we at least understand the *entire* history of Western thought from ancient Greece to the present. This universal horizon is lost in Sedgwick’s account of deconstruction and, I would suggest, with it are lost the philosophical concerns of Derrida’s work, down to the very non-concept of *différance* that is the motor behind the logic of opposition Sedgwick outlines.

In this way, one of the most general binaries operating in Sedgwick’s argument, the binary knowledge/ignorance is of a manifestly different order from the Derridean opposition absence/presence or even speech/writing. Sedgwick effectively allows that when she writes:

Insofar as ignorance is ignorance of *a* knowledge — a knowledge that may itself, it goes without saying, be seen as either true or false under some other regime of truth — these ignorances (...) are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as part of particular regimes of truth. (8)

Unmistakably, the deconstructive strategy of analysing binarisms has been altered, *enhanced*, by Sedgwick’s avowed allegiance to Foucault’s project of analysing ‘particular regimes of truth’. Sedgwick moves from the general horizon of the deconstruction of binaries to the historicizing and particularizing aim of analyzing their ‘power effects’, as she explains: ‘[the argument] will move through a deconstructive description of the instability of the binarism itself, (...) toward an

examination of the resulting definitional incoherence: its functional potential and realization, its power effects (. . .)' (92).

This particularizing process can be seen at work even (or perhaps especially), in Sedgwick's famous substitution of the antinomy between 'essentialist' and 'constructivist' accounts of sexuality with the antinomy between what she calls 'universalizing' and 'minoritizing' views. Ross Chambers has argued that 'the analysis of the closet as an institution that arises from the incoherence of twentieth century perceptions of homosexuality that are simultaneously minoritizing and universalizing is an analysis that can only be made on constructivist (not essentialist) assumptions', thereby effectively aligning 'constructivism' with what I have called the particularized or historicized 'application' of deconstruction.⁴ Chambers suggests that Sedgwick's move 'could certainly be described as substituting a certain deconstructive constructivism for the Foucault version of constructivism', since 'if the incoherence that Sedgwick discerns (. . .) is, as she says, "irreducible", it is because such incoherence is a consequence of the *cultural practice* of sorting people into kinds that are in differential relation one with the other' (168, my emphasis). But if this is constructivism, it is certainly *not* deconstructive, at least not in the sense in which Derrida himself articulates the notion of elements being in differential relation one with the other, this articulation being something far removed from 'cultural practice'. Here is how Derrida puts it:

The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought of radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence. Being must be considered as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around.⁵

The 'cultural practice of sorting people into kinds' is already a particularized version of Derrida's 'system of differences'; the deconstructive moves that Sedgwick makes, whether 'constructivist' or not, function *only and programmatically* within a historical horizon circumscribed by 'culture'. In other words, this is not Foucault giving way to Derrida as source of Sedgwick's argumentative manoeuvres; this is the Derridean horizon circumscribed by Foucauldian notions of history and culture. In this version of Derrida the centred structure that proves to have no centre is a historically circumscribed structure, play is merely *historically constituted*, not the (non-) foundation of ontology as such.

This goes hand in hand with Sedgwick's avowed mistrust of the universalizing tendencies of a theory that would have a reach beyond the specific historical and cultural horizons under investigation: 'A point of the book is *not to know* how far its insights and projects are generalizable, not to be able to say in advance where the semantic specificity of these issues gives over to (or: itself structures?) the syntax of a "broader" or more abstractable critical project' (12). In Derridean shorthand one might say, 'this is therefore an *ontic* investigation', that is to say, it is an investigation concerned with the claims to knowledge and power of a particular regime of truth organized around the central concept/antinomy of the closet. And it is an investigation almost synonymous with, or paradigmatic of, the critical enterprise of queer theory. Queer theory's version of deconstruction is, to put it bluntly, to substitute 'sexuality' for 'metaphysics'. Sedgwick's undertaking in *Epistemology of the Closet* will be indefatigably to subvert the epistemological binarisms governing discourses on sexuality, but it will inevitably stop well short of the painstaking deconstruction that points towards something *other than the discourses of sexuality*, as with 'the trace' or 'archi-writing' that Derrida shows function in logocentrism as its effective deconstruction. Just as Foucault's project is to situate historically a discursive domain and analyse its power effects, Sedgwick interrogates the closet as 'regime of truth' for its own power effects, with no 'grand' intention of *deconstructing the closet*.

Derrida has often claimed to have been 'misunderstood' as addressing the domain of language, discourse or culture — but Derrida was not a queer theorist. And once this particularizing, historicizing reduction of deconstruction has been performed, in fact *because* it is performed, queer theory as Sedgwick practices it can begin. Sedgwick would have rightly insisted that what I have been describing as reduction or particularization is not only *not* the wrong move to make, but that it is the right, or the *queer* move to make. This is because Sedgwick foresees her own argument as being 'the theorized prescription for a *practical* politics implicit in these readings' (13). And this prescription is 'for a multi-pronged movement whose idealist and materialist impulses, whose minority-model and universalist-model strategies (...) would likewise proceed in parallel without any high premium placed on ideological rationalization between them' (13). This is a bottom-up model where politics itself dictates the 'multi-pronged' movement of a 'prescription' for politics whose ideological or theoretical *impurity* is its strength and not its weakness. In this way, remaining faithful to the theoretical *élan* of deconstruction is viewed as

suspect: 'Deconstruction, founded as a very science of *diffër(e/a)nce*, has both so fetishized the idea of difference and so vaporized its possible embodiments that its most thoroughgoing practitioners are the last people to whom one would now look for help in thinking about particular differences' (23). In search of these 'particular differences', and in defence of them, Sedgwick has to sustain 'embodied' difference, and to assert, as her first 'axiom' goes, that 'people are different from each other' (22). As a proposition this is as far removed from the logic and the legacy of deconstruction as it could possibly be.

After giving a long list of 'things that can differentiate people of identical gender, race, nationality, class, and "sexual orientation"' (25), a list which, if read with a Derridean universalizing focus would look hopelessly individualizing and almost intended to make theoretical intervention impossible, she writes: 'To alienate conclusively, *definitionally*, from anyone on any theoretical ground the authority to describe and name their own sexual desire is a terribly consequential seizure' (26). And a few lines later: 'The safer proceeding would seem to be to give as much credence as one finds it conceivable to give to self-reports of sexual difference — weighting one's credence, when it is necessary to weight it at all, in favour of the less normative and therefore riskier, costlier self-reports' (26). More than twenty years of queer theory have demonstrated the enormous sway such pronouncements have; they read almost like a credo, which is why they rightly belong to a section of her work Sedgwick terms 'axiomatic'. At the same time though, such a credo is completely unimaginable within the context of 'French Theory'. Radical anti-humanism as promoted by the French 'masters', including Foucault and Derrida, would have absolutely no truck with the notion of 'self-report', not to mention the seemingly entirely pragmatic preference for 'riskier, costlier' ones. In the end, I take these 'axiomatic' pronouncements to be emblematic if not definitional of queer theory precisely in that they seek to put the 'science of *diffër(e/a)nce*' in the service of *particular* differences, thereby seeking not to interrogate but to shore up the practical and theoretical intelligibility of any, and that means all, sexual differences.

Real Trouble

Judith Butler is arguably the figure most would associate with the investigation of ways in which theoretical and practical intelligibility

is or is not bestowed upon sexual difference. From *Gender Trouble* via *Bodies that Matter*, *The Psychic Life of Power*, through to her part in the co-authored *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* and *Antigone's Claim* she has interrogated categories of both gender and sexuality in an effort to think the ways in which marginal or less normative identifications or 'self-reports' can be intelligible or are not allowed to be so.⁶ Her work is complex, challenging and evolving in ways I cannot hope to do justice to in this essay. Nor am I able, unfortunately, to restrict my investigation into only one of her books because of, on the one hand, the evolution and complexity I just mentioned, and, on the other, my choice of 'pairing' with her. Butler is also indebted to Foucault and to Derrida in her own influential theoretical interventions, and, due perhaps to the fact that she also trained as a philosopher, she is less likely to be found dislocating the philosophical paradigms handed down by the French—with one notable exception: Jacques Lacan. Choosing Lacan to 'pair' with Butler is a difficult enterprise for three principal interrelated sets of reasons:

1) Because her engagement with Lacan is constant in the period I shall be investigating; constant but evolving, and it is this evolution that I shall seek to interrogate. Were I to confine myself to looking only at, say, *Gender Trouble*, particularly important elements of this engagement would not have been accounted for.

2) Because alongside Lacan one has to contend with the legacy of psychoanalysis as a whole, as a theory and as a mode of discourse that centres around issues of sexuality and which effectively forms an alternative approach to such issues—alternative, that is, to queer theory, which has more often than not been its worst enemy. The story of that animosity is far too complex to go into in any detail in the space available here.⁷

3) As a corollary to this, when Butler engages with Lacan she engages not only with Freud, of course, but, significantly, with Lacanian thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek. I shall have no recourse to Butler's analysis and queering of Freud, to my mind one of the most brilliant thought-experiments in all of queer theory, and I shall have to take the 'dialogue' with Žižek implicitly as a dialogue with Lacan, with the obvious risk of reductionism that this brings.

So why choose Lacan? To anticipate what follows, however much Butler's engagement with him may have proved to be a dead-end (or not), it is the way the engagement is conducted, the way Lacan is repudiated or, to use psychoanalytic terminology, *disavowed* in Butler's writings that has something of consequence to tell us about the queer reception and transformation of another key player in 'French Theory'.

The major points of divergence and disagreement between Butler and Lacan and his followers are organized around three closely interrelated concepts in Lacanian theory. The first is the notion of sexual difference itself, which Lacan understands as real, which in his sense means unavailable to symbolization and signification, beyond the domain of discourse.⁸ The second problem is about the signifier that Lacan upholds as the very signifier of sexual difference, the phallus. At least on the surface Butler has good reason to be worried about this notion, not because she conflates the phallus as signifier with the penis as organ, but because the phallus seems, in Lacanian theory, to be a *privileged* signifier whose power is such that assuming any kind of sexual identity depends on one's relation to it. The third problem concerns the status of the Lacanian real, and therefore of sexual difference as real, and of the status, real or not, of the phallus as 'agent' of signification. The real is the unsymbolizable, but does it have a specific content? Butler asks whether what is said to be foreclosed in the real actually corresponds to sexual identity, in an indirect critique of Lacan's famous aphorism, 'woman does not exist' (*la femme n'existe pas*).⁹ These problems are, as I said, interrelated and in essence inseparable; so proceeding, even for the sake of argumentative strategy, to discuss them separately will inevitably result in their intermingling. Nevertheless, I propose that my interrogation of Butler's engagement with Lacan moves from 'arguing with the Real', through the signification of the phallus towards the (non)meaning of sexual difference in order to gauge what is consequential in Butler's sustained 'battle' with Lacanian psychoanalysis.

To begin with, from a Lacanian point of view, as Butler is acutely aware and as it has been indefatigably argued by her critics, to 'argue with the real' is not possible. Arguing is definitionally a kind of discourse and, in the case of Butler's essay 'Arguing with the Real' (*BTM*, 187–222), it is writing about/against the real, attempting to reconfigure the real in writing. Lacan aphoristically denies absolutely this endeavour: first, because 'we would be led to define the real as the impossible', and because the real is that 'which doesn't stop not being written'.¹⁰ Butler stubbornly refuses to accept this as a given, a psychoanalytic axiom, because in her view this poses an insurmountable limit to the possibilities of intelligibility for subjective positions, always bringing back the subject and its possible reconfigurations to the same limit, seen as normative and prohibitive:

On the one hand, we are to accept that 'the Real' means nothing other than the constitutive limit of the subject; yet on the other hand, why is it that any

effort to refer to the constitutive limit of the subject in ways that do not use that nomenclature are considered a failure to understand its proper operation? Are we using the categories to explain the phenomena, or marshalling the phenomena to shore up the categories, 'in the name of the Father', if you will? (*CHU*, 152)

The real, in Butler's sense, is a marker for that which cannot enter into symbolic communication, intelligibility and exchange *because it is not allowed to*, and psychoanalytic accounts of subjectivity and sexuality that utilize the notion of the real are automatically understood as normative and prohibitive. This aligns with her argument, from *Gender Trouble* onwards, that the prohibition of incest, posited in psychoanalysis as the taboo yielding the formation of sexual and gender identity through the threat of castration, is inconceivable without a concomitant prohibition of homosexuality.¹¹ To subvert the constitution of the real, Butler deploys a formidable argument casting Žižek's Lacanian defence of the real as inscrutable and therefore unapproachable by the discursive strategies of queer or feminist reasonings as in itself a normative fall-back to a defensive and prohibitive position: 'If the "threat" of castration [which in Lacanian theory is connected to trauma, and to the real] is to be protected, what then does the threat of castration *secure*?' (*BTM*, 197). As Sarah Kay puts it in her discussion of the debate between Žižek and Butler that began with 'Arguing with the Real': 'for Butler, the real is not "sexual difference", but "prohibited sexualities".'¹² I would add that it is not just 'prohibited sexualities' but, in accordance with Butler's formulation of gender identity as iteration and performativity, the status of gender that is here contested. Writing about the Lacanian formula whereby 'woman does not exist', Butler sees in it another prohibition, another relegation of a gendered position into the unsymbolizable of the real:

Such a view not only reifies women as the lost referent, that which cannot exist; and feminism, as the vain effort to resist that particular proclamation of the law (a form of psychosis in speech, a resistance to penis envy). To call into question women as the privileged figure for 'the lost referent', however, is precisely to recast that description as a possible signification, and to open the term as a site for a more expansive rearticulation. (*BTM*, 218)

It could be argued, as Butler herself has done, that these questionings of the intractability of the real, and these attempts at reformulating what counts as the constitutive limit of the subject are politically valuable and necessary despite any protestations of violating Lacanian orthodoxy.

But, as we shall see, Butler's refusal to take the Lacanian real for what it is results in other, more significant 'structural misunderstandings'.

If the Lacanian real is to be contested because of its perception as normative and prohibitive exclusion, then the Lacanian phallus, the easily masculinized signifier that governs sexual identification, is an even more appealing target. Feminists had already taken issue with the centrality of that concept to Lacan's theories of the subject, but what is perhaps surprising is that Butler does not propose to abandon the phallus but rather to reconfigure it, or, if you like, to *queer* it, in a gesture typical of her engagement with Lacan as a whole. She offers the extraordinary conception of 'the lesbian phallus' as antidote to Lacan's 'phallogocentrism':

The lesbian phallus may be said to intervene as an unexpected consequence of the Lacanian scheme, an apparently contradictory signifier which, through a critical mimesis, calls into question the ostensibly originating and controlling power of the Lacanian phallus, indeed, its installation as the privileged signifier of the symbolic order. (*BTM*, 73)

Without going into the detail of this interrogation, I would summarize Butler's position as an attempt to debunk the potency of the phallus as 'privileged signifier of the symbolic order' by showing that its potency is an *after-effect* of its imaginary reification and coronation as privileged signifier: 'what operates under the sign of the symbolic may be nothing other than precisely that set of imaginary effects which have become naturalized and reified as the law of signification' (*BTM*, 79). In this way Butler has hit upon an element intrinsic to Lacanian theory, namely that the symbolic order of language and nomination is always constituted as an after-effect, or, as Lacan would say, *après-coup*. Despite her intention to subvert the phallus, her own subversion is an astute demonstration of the operation whereby the phallus comes to be 'installed' as the 'privileged signifier': 'The phallus would then emerge as a symptom, and its authority could be established only through a metaleptic reversal of cause and effect. Rather than the postulated origin of signification or the signifiable, the phallus would be the effect of a signifying chain summarily suppressed' (*BTM*, 81).

Has Butler therefore managed to 'prove Lacan right' even as her effort was to subvert the centrality of the phallic concept? Well, not exactly. She is certainly 'right', if by that we mean she is reading Lacan *straight*, in pointing out that the seemingly omnipotent position of the phallus as a signifier in the symbolic order is the result of

an *après-coup*. But her insistence on the phallus being a necessarily masculine and heterosexist conception is not supported by a reading of Lacan and therefore her attempt to subvert it as the privileged signifier controlling sexual difference is unwarranted. For Lacan, and despite the fact that he does hold on to the overdetermined name 'phallus', the phallus is a singular signifier burdened with the function of signifying the failure of signification. He famously equates it with the square root of minus one, an imaginary number, not to be found in nature (not, therefore, the penis), but which has effects on the series of significations performed by 'real' numbers.¹³ This has at least two consequences for Butler's argument. The first is that her own subversion of the phallus as imaginary reification is precisely what Lacan intends by equating the phallus to an imaginary number: the symbolic order, and the phallus that is 'installed' at its centre is still able to signify because of an imaginary effect. The phallus as cause is the effect of the phallus as effect.¹⁴ Secondly, and since the reason Butler finds it necessary to subvert the Lacanian phallus is to debunk its presumed status as *masculine* privileged signifier, it is illegitimate to presume that a signifier with the singular status of the imaginary number can have a masculine *or* a feminine determination, despite the persistence of the term. It would be truer to argue, with Joan Copjec, that 'the peculiarity, or singularity, of the phallic signifier is due precisely to the fact that it ruins the possibility of any simple affirmation or negation.'¹⁵ In other words: the phallus is precisely the signifier that founds sexual difference, not as 'natural' and given, but as *impossible*, that is to say, as *real*.¹⁶

We're back with that impossible notion, then. As I mentioned earlier, what bugs Butler about the real is not only its intractability, the fact that, as Lacan says, 'the real is always in its place', but the fact that one of the things, if not the chief 'thing', accounted for as real in Lacanian theory is sexual difference. In a reading of the theory of sexuation emerging from Lacan's *Seminar XX*, Butler sees the opportunity to reveal sexual identity as *constructed*:

the construction of a coherent sexual identity along the disjunctive axis of the feminine/masculine is bound to fail; the disruptions of this coherence through the inadvertent reemergence of the repressed reveal not only that "identity" is constructed, but that the prohibition that constructs identity is inefficacious (the paternal law ought to be understood not as a deterministic divine will, but as a perpetual bumbler, preparing the ground for the insurrections against him). (GT, 38)

Butler in effect uses Lacan, entirely against the grain, to support her extraordinary insight that gender identification is the result of what she calls 'the heterosexual matrix', itself founded on an originary repudiation of primary bisexuality. 'Sexual difference' is thus shown to be a discursive determination which grounds the heterosexual matrix and looks back on originary bisexuality as that which requires mourning in order for the fixed heterosexual gender positions to arise:

From the start, however, the binary restriction on sexuality shows clearly that culture in no way postdates the bisexuality that it purports to repress: it constitutes the matrix of intelligibility through which primary bisexuality itself becomes thinkable. The 'bisexuality' that is posited as a psychic foundation and is said to be repressed at a later date is a discursive production that claims to be prior to all discourse, effected through the compulsory and generative practices of normative heterosexuality. (*GT*, 69–70)

This certainly constitutes a reading of what Lacan means by sexual difference; but by eliding (before going on in later texts to 'argue with') the order of the real, Butler is able to conceive of Lacanian theory as necessarily normative, as making out of sexual difference an intractable Law (a Law which is, in agreement with Lacanian terminology, Symbolic), and therefore a Law which, although presented in Lacanian *discourse* as unshakeable, can and ought to be reconfigured along the discursive lines she reveals:

It is clearly not enough to claim that this drama holds for Western, late capitalist household dwellers and that perhaps in some yet to be defined epoch some other Symbolic regime will govern the language of sexual ontology. By instituting the Symbolic as invariably phantasmatic, the 'invariably' wanders into an 'inevitably', generating a description of sexuality in terms that promote cultural stasis as its result. (*GT*, 71)

Butler thus sees in the Lacanian 'law' of sexual difference a site which avowedly calls itself a failure, but whose failure is incapable of being rendered into anything other than *perpetual* failure, with no possible strategy for resisting or overcoming that failure.

A step back is necessary here, before proceeding to see why this is a misconstrual of the Lacanian notion of sexual difference and, more importantly, what *kind* of misconstrual it is. The vocabulary of 'resistance' most clearly, but also of 'matrix of intelligibility', or even 'cultural stasis', is a distinctly Foucauldian vocabulary, and the project Butler sets out for her arguments is the Foucauldian one of locating the matrices of power and implicated resistance operating in

the domain of discourses on sexuality. Again, the background of this American queer debate is to be found in another debate that could be called 'Foucault against psychoanalysis', the details and history of which are far too intricate to engage with here.¹⁷ But, despite the fact that this Foucauldian vocabulary is not as explicit in *Bodies that Matter*, it becomes clear that her entire project relies upon the possibility of discussing sexuality, *including the psychoanalytic conception of sexuality*, as a mode of discourse which ought to allow, as the flip side of its own power-effects, the possibility of resistance to it. This is why, in what I take to be Butler's last sustained encounter with Lacan in *Antigone's Claim*, she reconfigures the Lacanian interpretation of the Antigone myth no longer as the paradigm of an ethical impasse as it was read in Lacan's *Seminar VII*, but as the paradigmatic metaphor of 'political catachresis', a myth which allows us to see how the very intelligibility of the human can always be reconfigured in view of a hopeful, salutary political future:

If kinship is the precondition of the human, then Antigone is the occasion for a new field of the human, achieved through political catachresis, the one that happens when the less than human speaks as human, when gender is displaced, and kinship founders on its founding laws. She acts, she speaks, she becomes one for whom the speech act is a fatal crime, but this fatality exceeds her life and enters the discourse of intelligibility as its own promising fatality, the social form of its aberrant, unprecedented future. (AC, 82)

Butler's project can thus be characterized as the queer project of inclusionary, hopeful interrogation of sexuality (and kinship, and gender) as a 'regime of truth' that *can and ought to be* perpetually reconfigured, so that the marginal, the aberrant, the excluded can 'enter the discourse of intelligibility'.

What of sexual difference then? Well, insofar as in Butler's way of understanding it, it acts either as a normative barrier erected by a policing discourse seeking to circumscribe the limits of social and sexual acceptability, or as a discursive *after-effect* reifying itself as prediscursive law, Butler misses the Lacanian point completely. I turn to Joan Copjec again for a conclusive counter-argument:

When we speak of language's failure with respect to sex, we speak not of its falling short of a prediscursive object but of its falling into contradiction with itself. Sex coincides with this *failure*, this inevitable contradiction. Sex is, then, the impossibility of completing meaning, not (as Butler's historicist/deconstructionist argument would have it) a meaning that is incomplete, unstable. (206)

The Lacanian notion of sexual difference as real decisively disallows the Butlerian gesture of inclusivity and reconfiguration, based entirely on a discursive understanding of sexuality. What it *does allow* for, as Tim Dean and Lee Edelman have argued from markedly different but equally queer perspectives, is a conception of sexuality that is inherently bound up with the real, the impossible, and the intractable—which does not mean, as Copjec again shows us, that it is set out eternally as heterosexist: ‘Sex does not budge, and it is not heterosexist to say so. In fact the opposite may be true. For it is by making it conform to the signifier that you oblige sex to conform to social dictates, to take on social content’ (211). On the contrary this conception of sexual difference makes any kind of sexual identification a necessary failure, which means conclusively that heterosexuality, homosexuality, and everything in between and beyond cannot possibly be thought of as anything more than *après-coup misidentifications*, and therefore sites for contestation and, indeed, resistance.

But isn’t this what Butler was keen to stress? Is not her political and theoretical wager placed precisely on the attempt to see sexuality (and kinship, and gender) as sites of resistance and reconfiguration? What can we therefore conclude about Butler’s troubling and recalcitrant, but nonetheless insistent and in key respects rigorous, engagement with Lacan? My suggestion is that Butler’s position vis-à-vis Lacan is clearly not adaptation and reformulation, nor is it plain repudiation (although after the dialogue with Žižek it would perhaps appear as such), it is rather a *disavowal* of Lacanian theory. Disavowal in the psychoanalytic vocabulary denotes a psychic reaction to the trauma of castration, a relation to the phallus as impotent but structuring signifier, a psychic position. I am obviously not claiming that a complex theoretical discourse is based on a psychic positioning, nor am I ‘psychoanalysing’ Butler by attaching the sign of disavowal to her entire work. But Butler *sees* that the phallus is only metaleptically constituted as a signifier of sexual difference—and yet persists in claiming that this metalepsis is necessarily masculinizing. Butler *shows* that the symbolic order is only constituted as normative as an after-effect, and that it consistently operates catachrestically by including ever more signifiers into its circle in an effort to conceal the internal fracture of the real—and yet proclaims that in catachresis we may find the ‘aberrant, unprecedented future’ of the inclusion of the marginal. Disavowal (also) means seeing and refusing to see at the same time, knowing and insisting on the repudiation of that knowledge. And this is not important because it can serve as a facile labelling of Butler’s

project. It is consequential because this process of disavowal, I would argue, is what has ultimately prevented queer theory, at least in the mode practised by Butler, from finding in psychoanalysis anything other than a normative discourse. At the same time, this process of disavowal, no more emphatically than in Butler's case, can be said to be the very process of *queering* itself: contorting a psychoanalytic orthodoxy that is perfectly capable of ultra-normative, heterosexist and indefensible conceptions of sexuality, gender identification, and nuclear family-centred kinship, and effectively, *après-coup* transforming it into a tool which allows for innovative and productive formulations such as gender melancholia and the lesbian phallus. Whether orthodox Lacanians would admit to it or not, I think it is obvious that Lacanian theory has never been the same since Judith Butler.¹⁸

Conclusion: How to Bring your Kids up Queer

'French Theory' was (still is?) an American identification with a series of discourses whose common origin was indisputably philosophy and whose often grand reach and universalizing horizons nevertheless unmistakably bore the mark of a radical political engagement. If Cusset is right in capturing the moment when 'French Theory' became *something else* in the United States, when it was brought 'down to earth' and made to speak to particularizing concerns about identity, sexuality, ethnicity, etc., then what, if anything, is unique about the way influences from 'French Theory' gave birth to queer theory? Perhaps the answer to that question, as I have tried to map it onto the discourses of Sedgwick and Butler, is that queer theory, arguably more than, say, postcolonial theory or textual criticism, *took more risks*. It took the risk of reducing and historicizing a philosophical programme into concrete strategies for discursive analysis, as with Sedgwick's 'applied deconstruction'; and it took the risk of disavowing insights that were productively utilized in a radical critique of its parentage, turning psychoanalytic theory against itself the way Butler has done. It took the risks of getting it wrong in order to queer it right. These are the risks of misconstruing, subverting, or even perverting established canons of theory which may well be the sort of risks that need to be taken if theory of any sort is to be reborn or to stay alive. More than that, and speaking summarily, it is arguable that the same risks of subversion, perversion and 'structural misunderstanding' are equivalent to the risks the French progenitors themselves took: Foucault adapting Nietzsche's

doctrine of truth, Derrida deconstructing Heidegger's ontology and the Hegelian dialectic, Lacan transforming Freudian psychoanalysis by making it speak the language of structural linguistics. Perhaps then, queer theory represents not so much the moment of birth as it does the moment of *growing up*, leaving behind the simple transposition of a mode of analysis from France to the US, say from deconstructive readings of Rousseau to deconstructive readings of Shelley. Not despite, but *because of* these operations of 'structural misunderstanding', of subversion, perversion, misconstrual that designate, as I hope to have shown, the developmental traits of queer theory in relation to its French influences, queer theory is not a simple transposition, however idiosyncratic. Queer theory, and this may yet be its saving grace, is not a moment, the moment of 'theory in the States', it is *theory*, it was born adult, fully formed with its parentage disfigured.

NOTES

- 1 François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, translated by Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). Tellingly, the original main title of the book is the same, in English, indicating that 'French Theory' is not a French concept. See François Cusset, *French Theory: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Cie et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux États-Unis* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003).
- 2 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).
- 3 *Speech and Phenomena*, translated by David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973); *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
- 4 Ross Chambers, 'Strategic Constructivism? Sedgwick's Ethics of Inversion' in *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays in Queer Culture and Critical Theory*, edited by Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark (London: Routledge, 2002), 165–80 (167).
- 5 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), 292.
- 6 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), hereafter *GT*; Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London: Routledge, 1993), hereafter *BTM*; Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), hereafter *PLP*; Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso,

- 2000), hereafter *CHU*; Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), hereafter *AC*.
- 7 It should also be said that several approaches that would name themselves queer have been made with a determinedly psychoanalytic, specifically Lacanian, focus which, depending on whom one speaks to, is either a radical way of dissolving psychoanalytic 'normativity' or a neo-conservative attack on queer theory. I would mention only Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) and Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). The battle, such as it is, still rages.
 - 8 The real is 'that which resists symbolization absolutely'. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953–1954*, translated by John Forrester (London: Norton, 1991), 66.
 - 9 Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love & Knowledge 1972–73*, translated by Bruce Fink (London: Norton, 1998), 7.
 - 10 Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis 1964*, translated by Alan Sheridan (London: Norton, 1977), 167; Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 59.
 - 11 This argument is, to my mind, one of the most brilliant thought-experiments in all of queer theory. See 'Freud and the Melancholia of Gender' (*GT*, 73–83); and also 'Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification' (*PLP*, 132–50).
 - 12 Sarah Kay, *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 93.
 - 13 See Lacan's 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious' in Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 671–702 (697).
 - 14 I am grateful to Ben Tyrer for this point.
 - 15 Joan Copjec, *Read my Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Boston: MIT Press, 1994), 215.
 - 16 Thus, even though Butler's imagining of the lesbian phallus is still a remarkable queer resignification of a deeply troubled term, it is perhaps more instructive, for queer purposes, to read the phallus as an abject, impotent (but thereby consequential) signifier, as Tim Dean does when he asserts, brilliantly and perversely: 'we may deduce that the phallus is less a figure for the penis than, more fundamentally, a figure for the turd' (Dean, *Beyond Sexuality*, 266).
 - 17 I already referred to queer theory's almost knee-jerk rejection of psychoanalysis which stems indisputably from its adoption of a Foucauldian agenda. I can point to David Halperin's *What do Gay Men Want? An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007) for a particularly virulent adoption of this standpoint. I would be remiss, however, not to mention its equally forcible (and in some key respects,

original) French counterpart in the work of Didier Eribon, particularly *Échapper à la psychanalyse* (Paris: Léo Scheer, 2005). And it would be equally remiss not to mention the altogether singular attempt to think Foucault and psychoanalysis together made by Leo Bersani, in a great number of writings, but particularly *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

- 18 The place to look for such possible little quakes in a theoretical universe that is as notoriously closed (and some would say close-minded) as Lacanian psychoanalysis is not so much, I would argue, Žižek's tiresome vacillations on the subject of 'feminism' or 'homosexuality', but the all-too-recent reception of Butler in France, where she has been engaged with not just by the nascent queer theory academic enclave, but by psychoanalysts themselves. See *Sexualités, genres et mélancolie: s'entretenir avec Judith Butler*, edited by Monique David-Ménard (Paris: Campagne Première, 2009).